



A Union of Professionals

AFT Michigan
AFL-CIO

RECLAIMING THE
PR  **M**ISE

K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION:

A MICHIGAN PLATFORM

We are AFT Michigan, a union of 35,000 members across the state, in urban, suburban, and rural communities from Detroit to Michigan's upper peninsula. We work in preschools, traditional and charter K-12 school districts, intermediate school districts, community colleges, and universities. We are educators who believe in the potential of our students and are committed to ensuring that Michigan has a high quality education system. Because equal access to a quality public education is essential to fostering successful individuals and maintaining a democratic society, we are dedicated to creating and protecting a public education system based on our shared values.

Public Education is a Common Good

We value public education as a common good and a right. Our communities and our state will prosper when we strengthen the quality of learning experiences for all students. Strengthening the quality of education requires that we invest in all public schools, rather than pitting them against one another. All people deserve the resources for a safe and supportive learning environment.

Strong Schools, Strong Communities

We believe that schools are community institutions as well as centers of learning. Strong schools anchor communities and communities strengthen schools. Education alone cannot eradicate poverty, but our schools can help coordinate the supports our students and their families need to thrive and bring parents and neighborhood residents together to improve their communities. Parents must be engaged and empowered as partners in their children's education.

Supportive and Welcoming Learning Environments

We value the incredible potential of our students and recognize that each has unique learning needs. Schools must be welcoming, inclusive and supportive places for all students. A child's learning environment is disrupted when a child's social, emotional, and basic human needs are not met. We have the responsibility to provide services and supports for students who need them. We cannot push out or turn our backs on vulnerable students.

Nurturing the Whole Student

We are committed to delivering a well-rounded learning experience that nurtures the whole student. Public schools must expose students to the arts, literature, physical education, and multicultural curriculums. We will continue to hold high academic expectations to foster growth for every student. We recognize a need for standards-based instruction and the importance of assessments as teaching tools, but are concerned that standardized assessments are being used excessively, leading to narrowed curriculum and decreased instructional time. We support accountability, but stand up against the misuse of standardized assessment to fire teachers, close schools and penalize students based on a single set of scores.

Quality Instruction Delivered by Committed, Respected, and Supported Educators

We believe that highly qualified teachers and school staff are our schools' greatest asset. Well-trained and supported educators deliver quality instruction and are essential to student learning. Technology has enhanced our abilities as educators, but it cannot replace the vital interactions between teachers, support staff, and students. Education professionals must have a voice in school operation and instruction, which must be protected through collective bargaining.

Moving Michigan Forward Together

Michigan must provide the resources necessary to support a high quality, equitable public education system for all. The corporate model of school reform creates competition for resources, resulting in an unacceptable system of winners and losers. When we shortchange some of our children, we shortchange our entire state. We need collaboration between communities, teachers and staff, parents, and administrators to reclaim the promise of public education!

In this platform, AFT Michigan has identified a set of policy priorities for Michigan public schools. Decades of solid evidence supports these ten pillars of a high quality education system.

Background Issues

Our children's education is too important to wager on unproven practices and policies. Research-based knowledge is essential to developing and implementing sound policies and enhancing professional practice. Too often, policy makers, even those that herald the importance of "data-driven decision-making," grasp at the latest reform fad trumpeted by the media.

Lost in many recent discussions of school improvement is the critical need to remedy *achievement gaps*—the disparity in performance between groups of students, particularly based on race and class.

Recent federal and state policies target our "lowest performing" schools for intervention. In December of 2009, following the lead of the federal government, the state passed legislation requiring schools performing in the lowest five percent on state assessments to implement one of four school improvement strategies: closure, restart (as a charter school), turnaround, or transformation.

While it is extremely important to improve chronically low-performing schools, there is little research suggesting that these strategies will improve student learning or address achievement gaps. There is no evidence that closing schools and moving control over educational programming to educational contractors, educational management companies, and for-profit or non-profit charter school operators raises student achievement or is a viable school improvement strategy (Saltman, 2010).

Similarly, no research supports the mass removal of staff as a turnaround strategy (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2010). In fact, the consequences associated with such strategies may be damaging to communities, school districts and children. Most low-

performing schools are marked by high levels of staff turnover and mistrust between adults. The collaboration required to turn them around requires more stability, not less.

What We Need

Research-Based School Improvement Strategies: Research shows that student learning increases when staff members are supported with high quality professional development, given the opportunity to collaborate with their colleagues, have access to resources and tools that foster growth, and are supported by strong leaders (Silva, 2008). Legislation forcing schools into one of four improvement models should be amended to eliminate strategies not supported by the evidence.

Multiple Measures of School Success: We can certainly learn a good deal about educational quality through student achievement data. But in too many places, "student learning" has become a euphemism for standardized test scores. Evaluating the merits of a school or a reform practice calls for mixed-methods research that examines multiple types of data.

Targeting Achievement Gaps: The following policies will help reduce our persistent achievement gaps:

- Early childhood education for all kids
- Comprehensive social programs
- Adequately funding districts that serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- Holding all students to high expectations by adopting common core standards

Transparent Methodologies for School Improvement: The Michigan Department of Education should develop a transparent process for identifying struggling schools that allows district leaders to intervene early.

Safe and Supportive Learning Environments

Background Issues

We can all agree that Michigan's children deserve great teachers and first-rate instructional materials. In addition, student success depends on healthy, safe, well maintained, and adequately equipped schools.

One of the most recognizable obstacles faced by many educators is school infrastructure. The research is unequivocal: poor school building conditions are a serious threat to the health and academic performance of students (Filardo, 2008). Even the best teachers and support staff cannot help their students succeed in a classroom that lacks necessary teaching tools. Similarly, when students and teachers are distracted by the conflict and blight present in some schools, learning is much more difficult.

Many students come to school with needs that impede their ability to thrive academically. Healthcare, social services, and parental involvement are too often divorced from education discussions, even though they are critical to student success. If we are serious about increasing student learning and closing achievement gaps, we must address factors that are beyond the control of teachers and schools.

What We Need

Community Schools & Wraparound Services: "Community schools" create a culture and environment that nurtures children and their families. There are successful models of community schools in Michigan and across the country where school buildings are open into the evening for tutoring, homework assistance, and recreational activities, as well as housing medical, dental, recreational, counseling and childcare services. Some students, especially those from low-income communities, depend on human services provided at school. Guid-

ance counselors, psychologists, social workers and other support staff are essential to fostering a student's emotional and social growth and ensuring they are ready to learn.

Clear and Comprehensive Codes of Conduct: School communities must adopt clear disciplinary expectations that support student learning and are consistently applied.

Anti-Bullying: All students deserve a safe and secure learning environment. Michigan should pass anti-bullying legislation encouraging districts to implement effective programs.

Positive Learning and Work Environments: Safe, modern, and healthy work environments maximize performance and are essential to attracting and retaining highly qualified educators. Existing buildings should be surveyed and assessed so that they can be improved. School districts - especially those with the greatest needs - need assistance in developing effective school design, renovation and construction programs.

Greening Our Schools: As we build new schools and renovate old ones, we should green our schools by prioritizing energy efficiency and environmentally friendly practices.

Meaningful Professional Development: Staff need support in addressing the needs of individual students and fostering a productive learning environment for all students. This requires that staff receive professional development on issues such as classroom management, diversity, and conflict resolution to prepare them for challenging situations.

Academic Assistance for Struggling Students

Background Issues

Michigan's 75% graduation rate (CEPI Graduation Report, 2009), means that one in four students struggles to complete high school on time. While there are certainly achievement gaps between and within school districts, all schools service children that require additional academic assistance. Some of these students "fall through the cracks" because they are not identified as needing assistance, do not qualify for available programs, or are unaware of existing services.

Supporting struggling students is a necessary step towards reducing Michigan's dropout rate and ensuring that our education system works for all students. Providing meaningful assistance for those that struggle requires identifying struggling students, implementing early intervention strategies, and supporting full accountability for all educational personnel.

What We Need

Early Intervention Strategies: Schools should provide school-entry screening programs that identify hearing, vision, and other medical conditions that may impede student learning. Staff need resources and professional development to help identify struggling students.

Student Support: Students have unique issues, learning styles, and abilities, and learning environments should accommodate their individual needs. There are proven programs that provide targeted academic assistance for struggling students. Solutions may include alternative settings, additional academic instruction through tutoring, mechanisms for family and community engagement, smaller class settings, and access to specialists.

Comprehensive Accountability: Insist that all educational personnel, including administrators, superintendents, teachers, and support staff, play a role in supporting struggling students.

Adult Education and Non-traditional Programs: For decades, we have bemoaned the difficulty of educating students whose parents left school before graduating and/or had bad experiences in the system. It is not realistic to break this cycle without reinvesting in adult education and non-traditional high school completion programs to increase educational levels in our communities across the board.

Meaningful Professional Development: Staff members working with struggling students require targeted professional development opportunities.

Background Issues

Our curriculum is the foundation of our hopes for the next generation. It must provide children with the knowledge, skills, and tools to lead successful and meaningful lives. All children, regardless of neighborhood, deserve to be exposed to a rich, well-sequenced curriculum, starting before kindergarten. Increased testing requirements have squeezed music, arts, history, and other non-tested subjects out of the curriculum. Just because something is easily tested does not make it more important. A well-rounded and rich common curriculum is essential to preparing students to be college and career ready.

The strength of any curriculum rests on the *standards* that frame learning experiences. Standards define the knowledge and skills that students should acquire and are vital to ensuring that we hold all students to high expectations. Governors and state commissioners of education from 48 states and the District of Columbia (including Michigan) have committed to developing *Common Core Standards* in English-Language Arts and Mathematics for grades K-12 that are clear, understandable, aligned with college and work expectations, rigorous in content and higher-order skill application, and evidence-based.

In order to provide useful feedback on student progress and inform future learning experiences, student assessment must consider *multiple measures of learning* (not just standardized tests) in order to provide thorough information. Standardized testing can be a useful tool, but only if it is aligned with a rich curriculum (tied to common core standards) and combined with other assessment tools.

What We Need

Re-emphasize Social Studies, Science, the Arts, and Physical Education: These important disciplines must be included in curricular frameworks even though they are not often included in high-stakes testing. Michigan should

adopt common core standards for these important subjects in order to ensure that they do not vanish from our schools.

Extra-Curricular Opportunities: Common sense and years of research support the crucial role extra-curricular activities can play in student success, but tight budgets and the focus on test scores are squeezing them out.

Comprehensive Reading Instruction for Early Learners: There is no stronger educational research finding than the importance of developing early literacy skills. Quality pre-school and all-day kindergarten programs allow children to develop the language, vocabulary, and conceptual skills crucial to becoming an active reader. Reading instruction should include the proven combination of individualized, small group, and whole class instruction. Class size matters when teaching reading, and staff must have access to all necessary supplies, materials, and professional development.

Responsible Student Testing: High-quality student testing that supports and enhances teaching and learning can be a useful instruction tool. However, testing should not overshadow the importance of student learning, and high stakes tests should not carry disproportionate weight in educational decisions. Quality assessment means using a variety of assessment tools, including multiple measures of student performance, and aligning assessment tools with curricular standards.

Career and Technical Education Options: The overemphasis on high stakes testing has also reduced opportunities for students to learn concrete career skills, which particularly impacts some of our most at-risk students. Reviving such programs will require funding and will.

Meaningful Professional Development: In order for curriculum to meet its goals, it is essential that staff receive high quality professional development aligned with common core standards.

Background Issues

We want all students to receive a quality education, and there is no question that this means improving our schools across Michigan. However, our current political climate is one where honest discussions about addressing root causes are avoided and educators are made scapegoats for poor student achievement. In fact, calculated attacks have been aimed at reducing the voice of teachers and staff in education reform and school communities, as legislators have attacked educator bargaining rights as punishment for political and policy opposition. In addition, the Teacher Tenure Act was weakened to protect teachers only against "arbitrary and capricious" actions.

The professional voice of educators has continually improved student learning conditions and the quality of programming that our schools offer. Collective bargaining gives teachers the right to have a direct voice to educate and advocate for students. Limiting this voice compromises student learning and student safety, and deprofessionalizes the field of education overall. Full bargaining and tenure protections should be restored immediately.

What We Need

A Collaborative Approach: Professional organizations that represent school employees actively work to promote student success and believe in improving Michigan schools. Rather than attacking public school employees, policymakers should embrace their role in education reform. Incorporating teachers and staff in the design and implementation of school improvement programs is the only way to create the type of deep and lasting change Michigan students need.

Remove Restrictions on District-Level Decision-Making: In order to produce positive impacts on student learning, policies such as

evaluation and merit pay must have the kind of buy-in produced by collective bargaining. Unfortunately, local school boards and teachers have been prohibited from bargaining over these issues. We should remove these restrictions on local decision-making and scale back the powers of emergency managers to a reasonable level in order to restore meaningful educator input in these discussions.

Protect Teacher and Staff Voice: School employees need the ability to advocate for students without the fear of being terminated or labeled ineffective. Whether staff members witness gross misconduct in their school community or just have an idea that could improve student learning, they should not be intimidated into silence. Even though collectively bargained contracts provide the most effective protection of staff voice, whistle blower protections should be strengthened to protect all school employees who speak out on behalf of their students and against unethical behavior.

